Stephen Davies
Musical Understandings and Other Essays on the Philosophy of Music.
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Stephen Davies was the first to argue that music is expressive of emotions in virtue of displaying emotion characteristics in appearance. In fact, he presented the view already in his dissertation of 1976. According to Davies, musical expressiveness does not reside in its expressing any particular agent's emotions, be that the composer, performer, listener, or a hypothetical musical persona the listener imaginatively projects into music. Rather, music is objectively and literally expressive of emotions 'in recalling the gait, attitude, air, carriage, posture, and comportment of the human body' (10). Such resemblances between music and the way in which, for example, a sad person appears allow the listener to experience music as expressive of sadness. This 'appearance emotionalism' is still the starting point of this thorough and analytic collection of 13 essays.

A central argumentative thread in the collection is Davies's attempt to carve a place for a moderate version of emotionalism, the view that the expressiveness of emotions is an objective and literally possessed, though response-dependent, property of music. Davies proceeds by defending the view against its various alternatives, from hypothetical emotionalism to formalism (Chapters 1 and 2); by discussing a number empirical questions surrounding musical expressiveness, perception, and understanding (Chapters 3, 4, 7, and 10); by arguing for compatible views in the ontology of music (Chapters 11 and 12); and by offering exemplary treatments of musical works (Chapters 9 and 13).

That expressiveness is an objective property of music means that qualified listeners agree, to a great extent, about their emotive descriptions of music. As Davies rightly points out, whether there is such agreement is a question for empirical research, and the answer depends on the expected specificity of the emotions allegedly expressed by music. Davies himself assumes that music is capable of being expressive of only a few emotions, the likely candidates being sadness, happiness, timidity, and anger. In fact, one may wonder whether such a view is *too* moderate to be an attractive version of emotionalism. Do these four general emotion categories add anything to music's expressive powers? Davies responds by arguing that there is variety, subtlety, and detail in the ways in which these few emotions may be musically expressed. But does that not mean simply that we have reverted to discussing the purely musical?

Besides, the listeners' agreement on emotive descriptions of music is not enough for emotionalism, as people can also agree on the aptness of metaphors. What looks like agreement in attributing objective and literally possessed emotive properties to music could, on closer inspection, turn to be agreement in the suitability of these figures of speech for the characterization of something that escapes literal description. Davies's reader is thus entitled to an argument against the formalist or metaphoricist view that music, as a non-sentient phenomenon, may be characterized as happy or sad only metaphorically. In Chapter 2, 'Music and Metaphor', Davies sets out to offer just such an argument. He claims, contra Nick Zangwill

and Roger Scruton, that while we do not apply emotion terms to music in the sense in which we apply them to sentient creatures, we do not use them metaphorically either. Nor do we use them in a non-synonymous sense of attributing to music specifically musical 'emotions' that are sui generis and bear no relation to human emotions. Rather, Davies argues, we apply emotion terms to music in an extended, polysemic sense that still bears a connection with the primary usage. Just as the mask of tragedy may be literally described as sad without attributing sadness to the mask, so too music may 'cut a sad figure' in a literal, if secondary, sense of sadness. In his view, this extension of meaning rests on our natural tendency to animate even the inanimate.

The naturalistic bent of the above response is characteristic of Davies's work in general. To be sure, while relying on empirical work in psychology and musicology, Davies also expresses reservations about some of such research conducted so far. For example, in Chapter 3, which deals with cross-cultural recognition of musical expressiveness, he rightly points out that there are a number of methodological problems involved. For example, the studies have not always properly distinguished between contingent associations and cases of genuine expressiveness that rest on musical dynamics or between the listener's own feeling and the one allegedly belonging to music itself. Psychological studies have also tended to overlook cultural particularities and differences between musical traditions, focusing more on that which is shared across cultures. Davies is careful to balance his own account between the two poles of nature and nurture, emphasizing the cultural variation and the need of acculturation and training for musical understanding while acknowledging the basic cognitive and biological structures underlying this very possibility. In his view, we can often identify correctly the expressive character of music, but sometimes, due to lack of familiarity with the local musical tradition, we cannot.

In spite of his well-placed reservations regarding some empirical studies, Davies's approach is thoroughly naturalistic. It treats the relevant questions mostly as empirical rather than conceptual, outlining a comprehensive and detailed account of our musical practices and traditions rather than attempting to provide norms for them from the philosopher's armchair. A case exemplifying Davies's appreciation of musical practices and traditions as well as his thorough knowledge of empirical research in music psychology is his method of arguing against Julien Dodd's timbral sonicism. This is the view that the instrumental means of performance are not among the work's normative properties. A rendition by the 'Perfect Timbral Synthesizer' is a legitimate instance of the work insofar as it sounds as if it were produced by the instruments specified in the score. Davies criticizes the view for its failure to do justice to the expressive actions and cultural diversity that belong to musical performance practices. Accordingly, the pull of Davies's own conclusion that timbre often contributes to the identity of a musical work rests on the numerous examples he brings forth from psychology, musicology, and the history of music.

In spite of Davies's deep commitment to the emotionalist thesis that music is objectively linked to emotions, his account has some surprising affinities with the formalist position. Take for example Davies's treatment of hypothetical emotionalism. According to this account, defended by Jerrold Levinson and Jenefer Robinson, qualified listeners imagine of the music that it presents a narrative about a musical persona who experiences the emotions of which the music is expressive. Such a view understandably allows the expressiveness of a wider range of emotions than Davies's own view does. Davies's main charge against the view is that what can

aptly be imagined of music is too unconstrained and vague. There are innumerable coherent narratives one may imagine being reflected in the musical progress. The very musical movement one listener imagines as displaying the experiences of a persona overcoming fear could equally well be imagined as presenting the experiences of a persona moving from uncertainty to conviction by another. Here, one cannot help but recall Hanslick's argument against emotionalism in general, namely, that the grounds of emotive descriptions of music are too ambiguous to warrant an objectivist interpretation (*On the Musically Beautiful*, Indianapolis: Hackett 1986, 14). And just like the formalist who allows the entertainment of figurative emotive descriptions as a heuristic devise to keep track of the transient phenomenon of music, so too Davies admits that imagining a musical persona may be helpful in coming to hear what the music expresses.

Likewise, in Chapter 7, the collection's centrepiece essay on the musical understandings of the listener, the performer, the music analyst, and the composer, one expects to learn about the contribution that the recognition of music's emotive character makes on the listener's overall understanding of the work. Yet, the theme is hardly mentioned. Instead, we get a systematic analysis of the kinds of specifically musical skills and knowledge—which Davies, unlike Levinson, takes to include knowledge of the work's large scale structure—relevant for musical understanding, which also the formalist reader would happily endorse. (Admittedly, the listener's experience of music's expressiveness is addressed in Chapter 4 on the emotional contagion where Davies, by contrast to Robinson, stresses the listener's attention to music's expressive character.) The same is true of the concluding essay offering a comparison between profundity in chess and in music, where the positive contribution of the expressiveness of emotions surfaces relatively briefly. Here, Davies grants that 'music is not profound as a result of revealing deep truths or ideas about emotions or their place in human life' (190). The attempt to produce such truths based on a musical work would inevitably result in banalities. Rather, Davies suggests, the profundity of instrumental music resides in what it may exemplify, in a purely musical manner, about the abstract intellectual capacities of the human mind.

A fair amount of the material of this book has been published before, and some of its essays are undoubtedly familiar to those interested in analytic philosophy of music. All the same, the collection does not fail to impress in its attention to detail and variety of music. It is this detail that also offers the greatest rewards of reading Davies's collection.

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